



TOVMA ARTSRUNI HISTORIAN OF VASPURAKAN

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It is noteworthy that the tenth century historian Tovma (Thomas) called his book a “History of the House of the Artsrunis,” not a History of Vaspurakan.¹ So it seems to me to be useful to approach this *History* via a brief discussion of Van, Vaspurakan, and the Artsruni House. In that way we can emphasize certain features of medieval Armenian society that are relevant to what follows.

The Site

Van appears in Armenian writers from their first works in the fifth century.² In the *Buzandaran*, or “Book of Epic Histories,” often mistakenly attributed to a certain Pavstos, Van is known as an important Armenian city, where there was also a significant Jewish population dating from the time of King Tigran the Great. In Book IV, 55, we read of deportations from Van and other cities of both Armenians and Jews, who were taken by the Persians to Iran. Van itself was then destroyed to its foundations, but the massive rock remained as the focus of a fortified center.³

¹ Tovma Artsruni, *Patmutiun Tann Artsruniats*, ed. Kerobe Patkanian (St. Petersburg, 1887; reprinted, Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1991); trans. Robert W. Thomson, *Thomas Artsruni: History of the House of the Artsrunik* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1985). All references to the text of Tovma are to the pages of the Armenian text, which are marked in the English translation. Extracts quoted from the *History* are based on this translation.

² This discussion is limited to the evidence in Armenian texts. I am interested in what Armenians themselves have to say, in the reminiscences of Armenian authors about this area, and in their perceptions of the past and present. It is not my intention to discuss the pre-Armenian history of Van as the capital of the Urartian kingdom.

³ Pavstos Buzandatsi, *Patmutiun Hayots*, ed. Kerobe Patkanian (St. Petersburg, 1883;

Armenians were unable to read the ancient cuneiform inscriptions on this rock and in the vicinity. Movses Khorenatsi attributed them to queen Shamiram (Semiramis), whose unrequited passion for the ruler Ara the Handsome had brought her to Armenia. She liked the country so much—despite the fact that her sorcery could not bring Ara back to life after he had been killed in battle—that she built a marvelous city by the lake, with an aqueduct that brought water from many miles away. Movses says that in his day this massive construction was home to brigands.⁴

Tovma Artsruni also refers to Van as the “city of Shamiram.”⁵ But he associates it in particular with Satinik (Satenik), the Alan princess, whose marriage to King Artashes is described by Movses.⁶ According to Tovma, Artashes used to bring his queen to the palace on the rock in the autumn season for diversion. He gives a lengthy, idyllic description of the lake, the mountains in the distance, the orchards and vineyards along the shore, the gardens in the town below, and not least the temple of Aphrodite/Astghik.⁷ Tovma was obviously a local man; his *History* contains several setpieces lovingly descriptive of the lake and the buildings erected by later princes and kings on the shore or on the island of Aghtamar.

Vaspurakan, on the other hand, is not an old Armenian name. It is a word of Persian origin meaning “principal” or “special,”⁸ which first appears in Armenian at the beginning of the seventh century.⁹

reprinted, Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1984). English translation and commentary, with appendices, Nina G. Garsoïan, *The Epic Histories (Buzandaran Patmut'wnk')* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁴ Movses Khorenatsi, *Patmutiun Hayots*, ed. Manuk Abeghian and Set Harutiunian (Tiflis: Mnatsakan Martirosiants, 1913); reprinted in facsimile editions (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1981), and with additional collations by Ashot B. Sargsyan (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1991); trans. Robert W. Thomson, *Moses Khorenats'i: History of the Armenians* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978). French trans. Annie and Jean-Pierre Mahé, *Histoire de l'Arménie par Moïse de Khorène* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993). See Book I, chs. 15-16.

⁵ Tovma, p. 63.

⁶ Movses, II.50.

⁷ Tovma, pp. 52-54.

⁸ David N. MacKenzie, *A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 88: *waspuhragan*.

⁹ It is first attested in the *Ashkharhatsoyts*. See Robert H. Hewsen, *The Geography of Ananias of Širak (Ašxarhač'oyc')* in the series *Beihefte zum Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients*, Reihe B, Nr. 77 (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1992), pp. 179-81. See also Sebeos, *Patmutyun*

It refers to an area east of the then agreed line in Armenia dividing the Byzantine and Persian sectors, which ran from the southern border of Siunik past the east coast of Lake Van. In this large area lived several Armenian noble families. By the time of Tovma, that is, in the early tenth century, the pre-eminent position of the Artsrunis in that area was recognized. Hence, the historian addresses his patron (Grigor-Derenik, father of Gagik) as "lord of the Artsrunik and prince of Vaspurakan."¹⁰ Vaspurakan remained in general use as a name for the region long after the Sasanian Persian Empire had passed from the scene.

The Family

These introductory comments on Van/Vaspurakan were necessary simply because traditional Armenian society, from the earliest period for which we have Armenian records until after the time of Tovma, was not organized by designations according to town or administrative province. The territorial divisions of Armenia were based on family holdings, and the name of the area was generally the name of the local noble family. The different offices of state were hereditary in certain families. These noble houses served as the administrative entities of the country. And from the ecclesiastical point of view, the bishoprics of the Armenian Church were mostly based on those noble estates. Hence, in the period under consideration there was no bishop of Van or bishop of Vaspurakan, but a bishop of the Artsrunis, a bishop of the Rshtunis, and so on.¹¹

The history of Armenia at this period was primarily the history of

Sebeosi, ed. Georg V. Abgaryan (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1979). The most recent translations are that in Italian by Claudio Gugerotti, *Sebeos: Storia* [Eurasistica, 4] (Verona: Casa Editrice Mazziana, 1990), and one in English by Robert W. Thomson and James Howard-Johnson, *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Tovma, p. 3.

¹¹ For general descriptions of traditional Armenian society, see Cyril Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1963); N. Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian: The Political Conditions Based on the Naxarar System*, trans. with partial revisions, a bibliographical note, and appendices, by Nina G. Garsoïan (Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1970); Joseph Laurent, *L'Arménie entre Byzance et l'Islam depuis la conquête arabe jusqu'en 886*, nouvelle édition revue et mise à jour par Marius Canard (Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1980).

the interests of the various noble families, their rivalries and conflicts. This was not a static history; the importance of different families could wax or wane. So before a detailed discussion of the written work of Tovma himself, which reflects a time when the Artsrunis were ascendant, it will be useful to survey very briefly the references to that family in earlier writers.

We first hear of the Artsrunik in the *History* of Agatangeghos. After the conversion of King Trdat, Saint Gregory the Illuminator was sent to Caesarea to be consecrated as the first bishop for Armenia. The king sent him off with a grand escort; the princes of sixteen noble families are named, and the Artsrunis come last.¹² This seemingly modest ranking will be explained away by Tovma.¹³ The Artsrunis are mentioned more frequently in the *Buzandaran*. They lived in southern Armenia, close to the Persian border, and there were strong pro-Persian attitudes among them. Their prince Meruzhan is often cited as an archetypal traitor.¹⁴ His fate as described by Movses Khorenatsi is a martyr's crown in the form of a red-hot iron circle.¹⁵

The fourth century, described so vividly in the *Buzandaran*, was a period of transition from a traditional pagan society to a Christian one. It is not clear when the Artsrunis first acquired a bishop; the *Buzandaran* does not specifically mention one. But later writers often mention the family and their bishop. In Eghishe's description of the heroic rebellion against Iran the Artsruni bishop Mushe played a prominent role, and when Vardan Mamikonian perished at Avarayr, their prince led Vardan's first division.¹⁶

¹² Agatangeghos, *Patmutiun Hayots*, ed. G. Ter-Mkrtchian and S. Kanayants (Tiflis, 1909; reprinted, Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1980, and Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1987); trans. with facing Armenian text, Robert W. Thomson, *Agat'angeghos: History of the Armenians* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1976). The text is divided into paragraphs and not quoted by pages. See paragraphs 791-96.

¹³ See note 42 below.

¹⁴ *Buzandaran*, IV.24.32.50; V.38.43.

¹⁵ Movses, III.37. But according to the *Buzandaran*, V.43, he was pinned to the ground by Babik Siuni with his lance, and then beheaded.

¹⁶ Eghishe, *Vasn Vardanay ev Hayots Paterazmin* [About Vardan and the Armenian War] ed. E. Ter-Minasyan (Erevan: Haypethrat, 1958); trans. Robert W. Thomson, *Elishe: History of Vardan and the Armenian War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). For the battle, see p. 116; Mushe is mentioned on pp. 28, 129. If this Mushe is identical with the Mushe of Aghbak [as assumed by Hrachia Acharian, *Hayots andzanunneri bararan* [Dictionary of Armenian Proper Names], vol. 3 (Beirut: Sevan, 1972), pp. 463-64], then he was martyred. See Ghazar Parpetsi, *Patmutiun Hayots*, ed. G. Ter-Mkrtchian and

The Artsrunis appear even more prominently in the *History* of Movses Khorenatsi. There, some new ideas emerge, reflecting the great interest of Movses in origins. He seeks an etymology for the names of the noble families, and a historical date for their appearance. In the book of the prophet Isaiah [37.38], there is a reference to the king of Assyria, Sennacherib (Senekerim). He was slain by his two sons, Adramelek and Sanasar, who escaped to Armenia. Movses cites this biblical tradition and regards the Artsrunis as the descendants of Sanasar.¹⁷ And indeed, the name Senekerim was adopted by a later Armenian king of Vaspurakan. The Artsruni family, therefore, could claim to be of royal stock, descended from the powerful kings of Assyria. Their actual Armenian name, says Movses, derives from their function. They carried the eagle standards for the Armenian king Vagharshak. He thus derives "Artsruni" from *artsiv*, meaning "eagle."¹⁸

Several Artsruni princes are mentioned by the seventh-century historian Sebeos. The most interesting reference is to a certain Vasak, son of Sahak, who was killed in a Persian invasion in 609. The brief passage is worth quoting: "Although he had caused many losses to the Persian army, yet all the Persian troops mourned him for his valor and bravery; as he was a powerful and tall youth, and especially because he had been raised among them and trained by them in their ways." This is a valuable reference to a long-standing tradition whereby boys were raised in a different noble, sometimes even royal, family. Such arrangements encouraged close ties between the original family and the head of the other family, who was called *dayeak*, "tutor, foster-father." The custom not only operated within Armenia; it also brought Armenian and Persian noble families together. It was an important cultural link between Iran and Armenia.¹⁹

By the time that Tovma composed his *History of the Artsruni*

S. Malkhasian (Tiflis, 1904; reprinted, Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1985), p. 101; trans. Robert W. Thomson, *The History of Lazar P'arpec'i* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1991). Numerous lesser members of the family appear in both Eghishe's and Ghazar's accounts of the war and of its aftermath.

¹⁷ Movses, I.23.

¹⁸ Movses, II.7. Eagle standards are mentioned in the *Buzandaran*, IV.2, but with reference to the Mamikonian house.

¹⁹ Sebeos, p. 112. For the institution of *dayeak*, see Garsoïan, *Epic Histories*, p. 521. The practice pertained in Georgia as well, the "tutor" being called *mamadzudze*. But to my knowledge there are no references to its being adopted as a link with Greek or Byzantine families.

House, that family had been gaining in prominence in Armenia and had been associated with many of the critical events of Armenian history: the conversion of the country to Christianity, the rebellion of 450-51 led by Vardan Mamikonian, and the wars between Byzantium and Iran described by Sebeos. They already had traditions concerning their origin and their name on which Tovma could draw for the greater glory of his patron.

It is worth noting that Tovma explicitly calls his book the *History* of a family. This was new in Armenian writing. For although there were histories that addressed a single issue, like Eghishe's *Armenian War*, or biographies of individuals, like Koriun's *Life of Mashtots*, the major historians had called their books histories "of the Armenians" (*Patmutiun Hayots*). In fact, these histories had a narrower focus than their titles might suggest. Eghishe and Ghazar, for example, were concerned with the Mamikonian family, whereas Movses Khorenatsi had his eye on the Bagratunis throughout. Nonetheless, Tovma is the first to concentrate exclusively on only one noble house.²⁰

The Historian

Although Tovma is concerned with a single family, we do learn a great deal about the wider Armenian society of his time by examining his unwritten assumptions and the attitudes of his protagonists in their deeds and words. In what follows I shall address two themes:

1) In order to put his patrons in the best possible light, what aspects of past Artsruni history did Tovma stress?

2) What patterns of behavior emerge as laudable? That is, what virtues were regarded as appropriate for a prince in a leading noble house?

Since Tovma was not blazing a new trail, in that the writing of history was a long-established genre by his time, we should begin by seeing whether he had any explicit models that he claimed to be following. He makes it quite clear that his model is the "world-famous teacher and orator [*kertogh*], the most accurate author" Movses

²⁰ Some later historians also restricted their focus. In the tenth century Movses Daskhurantsi (also known as Kaghankatuatsi) wrote a *History of the Aghvank*, the Caucasian Albanians; and in the thirteenth century Stepanos Orbelian wrote a *History* of his native province, Siunik.

Khorenatsi.²¹ Movses had set the standard against which Tovma wished to be compared. Two aspects of Khorenatsi's *History* are particularly relevant for Tovma. The first is the very broad sweep of the work, as Khorenatsi takes Armenian history right back to the most ancient times. Tovma also will begin with a description of the descendants of Noah, from whom all mankind has sprung, and of the ancient Assyrian kingdom. As noted already, Artsruni roots go that far back. The second major feature of Movses' *History* is that it is a disguised piece of propaganda for the Bagratuni family. Tovma makes his own focus on the Artsrunis more explicit. The parallels between the two histories are no coincidence, for at the beginning of the tenth century these two families were rivals for political power. The Bagratunis were certainly dominant in Greater Armenia, but Tovma is anxious to demonstrate that his patrons had no less grand a past. The genius of Movses is that he had set the rules. What Tovma tried to do was to beat Movses at his own game.

Noble Virtues

What then were the points a historian had to stress in order to put his patrons in the best possible light? The first was the importance of ancestry, that is, descent from notable persons of the remote past; then followed the prowess of one's ancestors in warfare and deeds of good administration. Since Armenia was now a Christian land, this emphasis on secular virtues had a parallel in the spiritual sphere, namely, the promptness of one's family to accept Christianity before others, and the piety of one's ancestors. How does Tovma deal with these points in his effort to outdo Movses Khorenatsi?

Both historians look to an Old Testament connection for the origin of their patron families, and both posit a foreign ancestor. Tovma looks to the Assyrians, but Movses had given the Bagratunis a Jewish origin.²² Because the Old Israel was a forerunner of the Church, it was easy for Movses to make the Bagratunis the first Christian converts in Armenia, since their being Jewish had already led them away from idolatry.²³ In like fashion Tovma stresses the antiquity of the

²¹ Tovma, p. 58. Other references to Movses occur on pp. 6, 9, 24, 44, 75-76.

²² Movses, I.22. This was later taken farther. By the early ninth century, the Bagratids were claiming descent from King David himself. See Toumanoff, *Studies*, p. 328.

²³ Movses, II.9.24 for their Jewish piety; II.33 for the first Bagratid to convert to Chris-

Artsrunis' Christian faith.

The prowess of ancestors was an important item in any patriotic history. Tovma often returns to this theme, but one episode stands out as being totally unknown to previous authors. According to Tovma, a certain Vahan Artsruni, who is not mentioned by Eghishe or Ghazar, rose to prominence at the time of the famous rebellion led by Vardan Mamikonian. When the Persian governor had been slain and the city of Dvin recovered by the Armenians, they installed the Catholicos there, and the Armenian nobles proceeded to build palaces for themselves. They entrusted the residence of Trdat the Great to Vahan Artsruni, since they planned to make him king over Armenia because he was a powerful man, shrewd and wise, humble, liberal and quick-witted. But the Armenian nobles became disunited—which is a common enough theme in many Armenian historians—they abandoned their plans, and went over to Vardan. Vahan accepted his secondary role and was martyred side by side with Vardan on the battlefield of Avarayr.²⁴

Why was this not known to Eghishe? Well, in fact it was, according to Tovma. He explains that the impious Syrian bishop Barsauma was attempting to spread his Nestorian heresy in southern Armenia and had borrowed the book of Armenian history which Eghishe had composed. Eghishe was then residing in the province of Mokka, south of Lake Van. But when the prince of the Artsrunis ordered Barsauma to leave his lands, the latter, in a fit of spite, expunged from this *History* all details concerning the house of the Artsrunis, including Vahan's martyrdom. Eghishe died before the book was returned to Mokka, and later readers supposed that the doctored version was in fact the original.²⁵

Military valor, then, in addition to ancestry was an important aspect of nobility. Furthermore, recognition of skill in warfare could come from one's opponents. Just as in Eghishe the shah is said to have high regard for the Armenian soldiers who had to serve in his army,²⁶ so

tianity.

²⁴ Tovma, pp. 79-81.

²⁵ Tovma, pp. 80-81. For Barsauma, see Stephen Gero, *Barsauma of Nisibis and Persian Christianity in the Fifth Century* (in Louvain series Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Subsidia, 63, Peeters, 1981).

²⁶ Eghishe, p. 44, gives an interesting description of the formalities observed by the shah toward his subjects.

in Tovma the caliph says to the Artsruni nobles: "You are men of valour, and from your appearance it is obvious that there is much strength in you." The caliph compliments them as true sons of kings and says that he will disregard their resistance to his royal administrators and their refusal to pay taxes because of the affection and mercy he has for them.²⁷ Perhaps too much attention should not be given to such flattery. In this case, at least, it is but a sweetener to the demand that the Artsruni nobles accept Islam. Tovma laments that many did try to save their lives on this occasion—at the expense of their souls.

Skill in single combat was also important. Prince Ashot Artsruni, for example, is said to have performed many notable acts of valor in the view of drawn-up ranks. This was a common feature of warfare at the time, when champions from either side would engage in combat in sight of their respective armies. Tovma does not exaggerate quite so much as some Georgian authors, but the fame of the victorious champion was highly prized.²⁸

Many of the battle scenes are fairly stereotyped. The same motifs and similes appear in Armenian authors from the *Buzandaran* onwards, and often the phrasing has parallels in the battle scenes of the books of Maccabees. As the Jewish heroes were assisted by spiritual apparitions, so also the heavenly hosts might come to the aid of the Armenians. On one occasion the Muslims were held at bay after battle had been joined, for a man in the likeness of light came and stood in the ranks. "In his right hand he had a sword, and in his left a censer full of incense. He was mounted on a white horse and fanned the smoke toward the enemy. As the smoke grew thicker, the Armenians took strength, and when it lessened they had a little respite."²⁹

The expected duties of kings and princes went beyond valor on the battlefield. This same Ashot on a previous occasion wrote to the

²⁷ Tovma, p. 155.

²⁸ Tovma, p. 107. For Georgian descriptions of single combat (for example, those of Vakhtang Gorgasali), see Robert W. Thomson, *Rewriting Caucasian History: The Medieval Armenian Adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press and Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 168-70, 192-93, 210-11.

²⁹ Tovma, p. 148; cf. the Introduction to Thomson, *Thomas Artsruni*, p. 46. For the influence of the Books of Maccabees on Armenian historians before Tovma, see Robert W. Thomson, "The Maccabees in Early Armenian Historiography," *Journal of Theological Studies* 26 (1975): 329-41, reprinted in his *Studies in Armenian Literature and Christianity* (Aldershot and Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing, Variorum series, 1994).

Muslim emir Yusuf indicating that he was prepared to come to terms and establish a peace treaty. Tovma puts the following aspirations in the letter: "It is the duty of kings who govern the world to watch over and care for the prosperity of the country, and soften the severity of painful demands for taxes, lest the productive capacity of the country be completely destroyed." Yusuf, on this occasion, passed through Vaspurakan "with a minimum of damage."³⁰

Armenian Disunity

Ashot also had trouble dealing with his own princes, who on one occasion were making secret overtures to the Muslims behind his back. He upbraided them:

If I seem to have wronged you, give now a response to my face and indicate expressly one by one each harmful act. But if I have cared for you tenderly like a father, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings for protection—is this the compensation you pay me? Did you not reflect on the benefits you have received from me? According to each one's age I honoured every one of you with appropriate care and love. The extensive goods among my treasures I gave up year by year to plunder [Tovma here refers to ruinous hospitality]. . . . So is this now the reward, that with treacherous plotting you plan to throw me and my family into the dragon's mouth, while you become the cause of carnage and captivity for the whole land?

When he realized that he could not win them over, Ashot resigned himself to his fate and surrendered to the caliph's general.³¹

Like Eghishe before him, Tovma frequently laments the disunity of the princes. He begins Book III:

Although we were oppressed and tormented with various afflictions by the domination of the Muslim armies, yet these were few in number and for short periods of time. For the Armenian princes were still living in unison, harmony, and concord. But when discord began to insinuate itself, the grace of the divine power departed. Just as someone might cut into pieces all the limbs of a body until the form of the living man has disappeared—whereas, if one of the limbs is lost, it

³⁰ Tovma, p. 117.

³¹ Tovma, pp. 136-37.

is an accidental deprivation but the whole person is not destroyed—in such manner was the unity of this country gradually destroyed as each individual plotted evil against his neighbour and his brother.³²

Tovma then contrasts the fraternal unity of Ashot's three grandsons two generations later. "Demonstrating the extent of their fraternal deference, with incomparable courtesy each regarded the other two as superior to himself, reckoning the dignity of their princely rank to be equally shared. Merely for his precedence [that is, because he was the eldest] did they agree to give the title to Ashot. In this unopposed harmony they divided the land into three parts." And for a while this mutual confidence succeeded in holding off the Muslim forces. The three were later imprisoned, not by the Muslim emir, but by another ambitious Armenian prince.³³

The individual ambition and gullibility of princes is well brought out when Tovma describes the way in which the young Hasan was lured into a plot to seize control of a castle in Vaspurakan. "Hasan fell for the bait, hoping for control of the castle and casting his eyes on the desire for ambition. He dreamed of gathering troops and cavalry, giving gifts to magnates and lords, and summoning everyone to support." The plot was successful, but peace between the parties was eventually made by the Catholicos. Our historian notes sarcastically: "By wise and judicious counsel, with sweet and gentle words, they persuaded the young Hasan [he was fifteen at the time], offering him the reverence due to his white hairs, the dignity of his princely station, and such-like."³⁴

Religious Attitudes

In the realm of spiritual virtues two aspects are important: the early date of conversion and the notable acts of piety exhibited by Artsruni nobles. In this regard, too, Tovma follows the lead of Movses. The conversion of King Trdat and the work of Saint Gregory the Illuminator, as described by Agatangeghos, emphasize the connection between Armenia and the West. Not only was Gregory consecrated in Caesarea of Cappadocia, he and King Trdat had visited the emperor

³² Tovma, p. 122. Cf. Eghishe, pp. 90-91, for Armenian discord.

³³ Tovma, p. 232.

³⁴ Tovma, pp. 223-24.

Constantine in Rome.³⁵ But Armenians also recognized that their church owed much to influences from the south, from Christian Syria whose capital was Edessa (Armenian: Urha, modern Urfa). This is made very clear in Koriun's biography of Mashtots. Now there was an ancient local Edessene tradition that its King Abgar had been in correspondence with Jesus Christ, and that after the Resurrection the apostle Addai had come to Edessa and founded the church there.³⁶ This tradition, which had taken written form by the fourth century, was translated into Armenian and expanded: Addai, known as Thaddaeus in the Greek and Armenian versions, was now considered to have come to Armenia after founding the church in Edessa. In Armenia he was put to death by King Sanatruk.³⁷ So although the first church did not survive until the time of Gregory the Illuminator, Armenian patriarchs could be said to sit on the "throne of Thaddaeus."³⁸

Movses Khorenatsi, however, had made Abgar of Edessa an Armenian king and identified his entourage in the traditional story as Armenian nobles.³⁹ Tovma does not challenge the basic idea but maintains that an Artsruni prince, Khuran, was the first Armenian believer in Christ baptized by Thaddaeus.⁴⁰ Thus, Artsruni claims to have been the first to convert are upheld.

Here it is worth noting that Tovma brings Artashes and his bride Satinik into the Christian era. Artashes is supposed to have built a palace for this Alan princess at Van. Nearby lived holy men, countrymen of Satinik's who had followed her to Armenia. These holy men rebuked Satinik for her continued attention to the vain cult of idols. But, according to Tovma, Satinik did not reject the worship of Astghik, because she expected her husband to lead the way and abandon idolatry

³⁵ Agatangeghos, paragraphs 873-82, for the visit to Rome.

³⁶ For the Syriac version, see Alain Desreumaux, *Histoire du roi Abgar et de Jésus* (Turnhout [Belgium]: Brepols, 1993), with bibliography. For the earliest Greek version of the story, see Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, I.13, Loeb edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955), pp. 85-97.

³⁷ The Armenian version is attributed to "Labubna." For the Armenian text with a French translation, see Ghevond Alishan, *Labubniay divanagir dpri Edesioy tught Abgaru* [Letter of Abgar by Lububna, Scribe of Edessa] (Venice: Mekhitarist Press, 1868). For Sanatruk, see the *Buzandaran*, III.1; further references in Garsoïan, *Epic Histories*, p. 411.

³⁸ *Buzandaran*, III.12.14; IV.3.

³⁹ Movses, II.24, for Abgar as Armenian; II.30, for his Armenian nobles.

⁴⁰ Tovma, p. 47. Khuran is mentioned by Movses, II.29, without any suggestion that he converted to Christianity.

first.⁴¹

The piety of the Artsruni nobles is stressed in various ways. In Agatangeghos the Artsruni prince was in sixteenth place in the escort accompanying Saint Gregory to Caesarea. This is easily explained, says Tovma: Tirots had been baptized by Saint Gregory and was of modest and humble character. Being a studious reader of the Holy Gospel, he did not push himself to superior rank among the Armenian nobles.⁴²

The Artsruni princes were staunch upholders of Armenian orthodoxy. Tovma states that during the reign of Marcian, when the famous rebellion of 450-51 (Vardanants) occurred, the emperor had convened a council of bishops at Chalcedon. No bishops from Greater Armenia had attended this council, and Tovma is the first to offer a reason. He claims that in the troubles after the rebellion Prince Vasak Artsruni had gone to Byzantium, where he was received by Marcian with rank and honor. But the emperor put pressure on Vasak and other princes to accept the Council of Chalcedon. They replied: "When you convoked the council, why did you not think it necessary to summon anyone from Armenia with a view to the unity of faith?" This is the first reference to Armenian absence from the council as a reason for not accepting it.⁴³

Loyalty to the Armenian faith was cemented by martyrdom on various occasions, or at least by imprisonment. In the ninth century the Artsruni Bishop Hovhannes and Prince Grigor were bound with chains and cast into an underground dungeon. They endured for three years before Prince Grigor succumbed to his torments. The bishop survived and was later released, with the title of confessor.⁴⁴ These and other heroes for the faith Tovma eulogizes in eloquent fashion.

One further—perhaps more realistic—comment about Artsruni piety. I refer to the fear of death. Prince Ashot and various others had apostatized at a time when their bishop had stood firm. But after Ashot was released from captivity in 858 he resolutely practiced the Christian religion, repenting for his denial of Christ. Six years later the time

⁴¹ Tovma, pp. 52-54.

⁴² Tovma, p. 58; cf. Agatangeghos, paragraph 795. According to Tovma, therefore, Tirots was baptized before Gregory's journey, the purpose of which (that is, ordination) was to authorize Gregory to administer baptism!

⁴³ Tovma, pp. 82-83.

⁴⁴ Tovma, pp. 153-62; pp. 207-08 for the release of Hovhannes and his title of "confessor."

for Ashot's departure from this world arrived, and Tovma comments as follows: "He was plunged into unfathomable remorse and regret; with flowing tears he made the confession of faith, hoping in the mercy of Christ. I do not despise or mock his remorse and repentance. But it is unclear whether they were effective, for with difficulty are scars cleaned away by the exercise of words. However, in the house of Christ's Father there are many mansions. Perhaps they [the apostates] will remain free of torments, although they will not enjoy the wedding feast with the bridegroom."⁴⁵

Ashot's terror of hell contrasts well with the attitude of his grandson, also called Ashot, the elder brother of the famous Gagik. This Ashot died of abdominal sickness at the age of twenty-nine. Tovma comments: "Although Ashot ended the measure of his life prematurely, he acquired a surplus by exchanging the certain and unfailing dissolution of this existence for spiritual, eternal, and undying life, repenting and regretting his youthful inclination to easy and quickly-accomplished evil deeds." Here follows a lengthy description of his pious death.⁴⁶

Worldly Pleasures

But life was not an uninterrupted series of battles, plots, and sudden death. Tovma paints a lively picture of more enjoyable pastimes, which included the building of palaces and the pleasures of the hunt. Just as in ancient times Artashes had delighted Satinik at Van with buildings and gardens, so the later Artsruni princes took advantage of sites along the shore of the lake, or on the island of Aghtamar. Tovma naturally elaborates at some length on the building activity of Gagik, son of his original patron. At Van he was responsible for several new churches; and on the great rock he added banqueting halls, improving on what had earlier been constructed by his father. At Mount Varag he provided a splendid covering for the relic of the Holy Cross, and he cut a water channel from that mountain down to Van. At some distance to the northeast, from where one could look down on the river Araxes and see Mount Masis, he built a pleasure palace. Here was an ideal spot for the hunt, with herds of deer, boar, lions, and onagers.

⁴⁵ Tovma, pp. 137-39 for Ashot's imprisonment; p. 209 for his return; pp. 216-17 for his repentance.

⁴⁶ Tovma, pp. 249-51.

In addition to various fortresses in his domains, Gagik founded monasteries endowed with income specifically set aside from certain villages.⁴⁷ The most famous of all constructions were those on the island of Aghtamar, described by the Continuator to the History of Thomas. But the church and palace need no further comment here, as they have been studied intensively elsewhere.⁴⁸

I would like to end this survey on a different note. Only once in this *History* are intellectual virtues mentioned. According to the Continuator to Tovma, the emir of Azarbayjan, Yusuf, had heard of the valiant deeds and wise intelligence of Gagik and desired to meet him. Gagik accepted the invitation, and the emir was not disappointed in the virtues of his guest:

When the tyrant beheld his glorious youthful figure and the wondrous beauty of his lovely face, he was amazed. On questioning him, he received replies of vast erudition that were at the same time profound and enigmatic. . . . Since the Muslim ruler Yusuf was a man of powerful mind, but the most disagreeable among all the sons of men, he therefore submitted the splendid and blessed prince to an arduous investigation. Raising his eyes, he observed him and measured his deportment on sitting and rising. In every aspect of royalty he found him refined and endowed with charming modesty, like gold tested in many furnaces. . . . He questioned him on the dynasties and thrones of kings and pre-eminent families, and the borders of each one's lands, beginning with the Medes and Persians, Judaea and Jerusalem, the Assyrians and Egyptians, the Greeks and Indians, all Armenia as far as the Gates of the Alans and of the Caspians—which [information] is very pertinent for kings. He found him versed in everything and exceedingly learned. He interrogated the undefeated champion on the battles he had fought. . . . He found him like a high mountain, immovable by the blasts and shouts of war. In all this and even more did the Muslim ruler Yusuf observe the grace of God manifested in the valiant and divine prince Gagik, and he greatly rejoiced at his visit to him.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Tovma, pp. 252-57.

⁴⁸ Tovma [Continuator], pp. 293-99. For the church, see Sirarpie Der Nersessian, *Aght'amar: Church of the Holy Cross* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965); Stepan Mnatsakanian, *Aghtamar*, English trans. K.H. Maksoudian ([Los Angeles]: Editions Erebouri, 1986); John G. Davies, *Medieval Armenian Art and Architecture: The Church of the Holy Cross, Aght'amar* (London: Pindar Press, 1995).

⁴⁹ Tovma [Continuator], pp. 283-84.

It is not necessary to quote more. Tovma reflects more than most Armenian historians the actual interests of the noble family he eulogizes. He is not concerned with learned matters, though a smattering of geography is useful and one certainly should know the names of the eminent dynasties of the past. Prowess in warfare is the prime requisite of the head of a noble family. He is also expected to act with largesse and impoverish himself through hospitality. He has to beware of the plots of his fellow princes and will not be above compromising his faith by apostasy. To redeem such faults, he will endow churches and monasteries and provide splendid ornaments for holy relics. He will expect his monks to pray for his soul, being rather terrified of death himself, while he spends his own leisure in hunting and feasting. What the historian does not explain is how, in such a milieu, he gained his own knowledge of books and previous Armenian writers.

In conclusion, I would stress two points. First, this *History* is significant as the first work to use the *History* of Movses Khorenatsi, though Tovma does attempt to improve on Movses in favor of his own Artsruni house. Second, since the Artsrunis never supplanted the Bagratunis, this *History* by Tovma had little impact outside Vaspurakan. Nonetheless, it remains the prime source for Artsruni traditions and an eloquent witness of noble life in Armenia before the Turkish invasions.